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# The Conservative Mind, by Russell Kirk

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# BOOK REVIEWS

THE CONSERVATIVE MIND. By Russell Kirk.\* Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953. Pp. 458. \$6.50.

For nearly a century, the Whig and liberal historians distorted events of the past by either disregarding or seriously underestimating the contributions made by conservative politicians and thinkers. The heroes of the Whig histories were the liberals, the devils the Tories and their spokesmen. Professor Kirk has now reversed this interpretation. The conservatives have become saints, although sometimes rather dissolute in their personal habits, while the liberals have become devils. The result of his study is unfortunately as erroneous, and as likely to arouse emotional rancor, as those of his Whig predecessors. A book which purports to be "a criticism of conservative *thought*" too frequently degenerates to the level of a diatribe against the liberals, while at the same time glorifying nearly all conservative thinkers. The reader is likely to gain the impression that not a single valuable contribution was made by the liberals, while nearly all conservatives of the last century and a half have exhibited an exceptional, and quite inhuman, ability to grasp all the facets and implications of contemporary problems.

This is not to say that *The Conservative Mind* has no merits, for it has several, not the least of which is the author's linguistic felicity. Aphorisms burst from his pen, and he is seldom obtuse and never dull. The sweep of the book is also commendable as he traces the exposition of conservative dissent from Burke to T. S. Eliot and Santayana. The student and the informed layman will find much to meditate upon in the lengthy quotations from such neglected figures as J. F. Stephens, Lecky, Maine, Randolph of Roanoke, and Coleridge, not to mention the great figures of Burke, Tocqueville, and John C. Calhoun. As an antidote to the liberal bias of the more famous intellectual histories, it is effective, although it is an antidote which, if swallowed whole, is likely to have damaging effects equal to those produced by the ailment it purports to cure.

Consideration of the work would seem to fall most naturally into two basic divisions: (1) Professor Kirk's statement of the "six canons" of conservative thought and (2) an examination of the "constructive" proposals made toward the development of a modern conservative pro-

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gram. An analysis of these two portions of the book will enable one to grasp both the strength and weakness of the conservative approach to politics.

Professor Kirk's canons of conservative thought<sup>1</sup> are as follows: (1) political problems are, at heart, religious and moral problems, for "divine intent rules society as well as conscience;" (2) an affection for the "proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life;" (3) a conviction that a "civilized society requires order and classes," combined with the belief that a destruction of "natural" distinctions between men leads to the rise of tyrants in consequence of the masses' need of leadership; (4) a recognition of the dependence of freedom upon property, which enables the conservative to perceive that economic leveling leads inevitably to the destruction of liberty; (5) a deep faith in tradition and prejudice as guarantors of social order, combined with a distrust of mere reason; and (6) "[r]ecognition that change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress. Society must alter, for slow change is the means of its conservation . . . but Providence is the proper instrument for change, and the test of a statesman is his cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces."<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of this list lie the Providential theory of history, a deep rooted distrust of human reason and human goodness, and a nearly mystic belief in the intrinsic value of tradition and prejudice as the basis of social order. One of the most frequently repeated conservative objections to eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism was the latter's assumption of the innate goodness of man. This naive belief led to the overly simple conclusion that all the ills of social life could be cured if the evil institutions which were held to be responsible for social maladjustment were either abolished or reformed. The conservative critics were right in attacking this chink in the liberal armor; for, if men were innately good, how did the evil institutions arise? All of the conservative critics hammered incessantly at the points that matters were not so simple; that institutional change was not enough; that the real problem lay within the individual rather than without. While the liberals repudiated

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1. For purposes of comparison, Peter Viereck's statement of the essential principles of conservatism might be noted. "The conservative principles *par excellence* are proportion and measure; self-expression through self-restraint; preservation through reform; humanism and classical balance; a fruitful nostalgia for the permanent beneath the flux; and a fruitful obsession for unbroken historic continuity. These principles together create freedom, a freedom built not on the quicksand of adolescent defiance but on the bedrock of ethics and law." VIERECK, *CONSERVATISM REVISITED* 6 (1949).

2. Pp. 7-8.

the Christian doctrine of original sin, the conservatives placed it in the central position in their philosophical outlook. Pessimism, then, is an ingrained conservative attribute—utopia is impossible. Upon the whole, matters will continue much as they have in the past, *or* they will become worse.

Few liberals, however, still cling to the confidence of their predecessors in man's essential nature.<sup>3</sup> Only by closing his eyes to Auschwitz, Belsen, the Soviet "correctional" labor camps, and the mass slaughter of modern war can any person continue to hold the naive faith of the *philosophes* or William Godwin. There are dark recesses in the human mind, filled with poison which may overflow and destroy the social order. Whether one wishes to refer to these poisons in the theological terms of original sin, or by reference to Freudian and neo-Freudian psychology, does not matter. Nor is it actually necessary to become involved in the argument of the "nature of man" versus man as a product of his social environment. For, even if the latter is accepted, it must be expected that men will be influenced by bad, as well as good, aspects of their social environment. Even the proponents of reform will be conditioned by their environment. Their proposals for reform will always be partially inadequate. Whatever the liberals' intentions may be, new evils will arise out of efforts to cure old ills; new injustices will develop out of solutions to old ones.

The conservative response to this difficulty is to decry all but the mildest of reform. Civilization is but a thin veneer beneath which is hidden latent savagery and bestiality. It has been produced slowly, and with the most heroic of efforts, by the labors and thoughts of a few men. But it is a tender covering which may be ripped away by the hands of the intemperate advocate of drastic change. There is only one sure way of retaining its polish and beauty, and that is by adherence to traditional institutions and traditional ways of doing things. It is for this reason that Professor Kirk emphasizes the value of prejudice in society. Such prejudice, however, is not mere bigotry. It "is pre-judgment, the answer with which intuition and ancestral consensus of opinion supply a man

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3. There is little evidence of contemporary liberal certainty of infinite progress. One modern liberal has written: "We must grow up now and forsake the millennial dream. We will not arise one morning to find all problems solved, all need for further strain and struggle ended, while we work two hours a day and spend our leisure eating milk and honey. Given human imperfection, society will continue imperfect. Problems will always torment us, because all important problems are insoluble, that is why they are important. The good comes from the continuing struggle to try and solve them, not from the vain hope of their solution." SCHLESINGER, *THE VITAL CENTER* 254 (1949). A similar attitude, perhaps even more profoundly pessimistic, may be found in COHEN, *THE FAITH OF A LIBERAL* c. I (1946).

when he lacks either time or knowledge to arrive at a decision predicated upon pure reason."<sup>4</sup>

That care should be exercised in proposing reforms is obvious, but the problem is not merely whether we should make changes, but what changes should be made and when. Professor Kirk, like other conservatives, recognizes that some change is inevitable. The practical differences between conservatives and liberals arise out of their efforts to deal with concrete problems. The two approaches are not divided by the chasm which separates advocates of political immobility and proponents of a revolutionary transformation of the social order.<sup>5</sup> Liberals do not necessarily neglect the value of tradition as a stabilizing factor in human activity, but neither do they invest it with religious sanctification.

The liberal attitude toward tradition is more likely to be eminently practical. Some traditions may be irrational, but this does not mean they must be swept away. Reasonableness is no more the sole criterion of social utility than it is the only basis of individual action. We all know that day by day life would be virtually impossible without the development of habits which enable us to perform many actions without conscious thought. In this sense, individuals' lives are greatly dependent upon tradition, for habits are but traditional ways of performing certain kinds of activities. Similarly, in social life, the development of "habits" is also essential. But just as the individual may become a slave to habit, thus losing that very freedom of action in other spheres made possible by habitual responses, so a society may become so thoroughly enchained by tradition as to make it incapable of dealing with new challenges.

The intelligent liberal should carefully assess the rule of tradition and prejudice in the social order. These are essential considerations in evaluating the probable consequences of efforts to change established institutions or practices. Not every effort to reform irrational social procedures is itself rational. If the objective is to make reforms which are socially advantageous, then it would obviously be irrational to make changes which result in such strong reactions as to do more harm than good to society. The liberal attitude toward tradition, then, is to recognize its importance as a cementing force in society as well as to understand the possible damage which might follow from cavalier efforts to

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4. P. 34.

5. "Mill and Burke are not opposites. They supplement each other, both being needed. Parliamentary government requires common agreement upon fundamentals. It requires the constant readiness of moderates of the right and left to unite against extremists of right and left. Liberals and conservatives agree more often than they disagree on such fundamentals as preferring political evolution to either revolution or immobility." VIERECK, *op. cit. supra* note 1, at 22.

introduce reform in the face of strong prejudice, but not to raise it to the level of a first principle forever beyond effective challenge. Whether or not an assault should be made upon a particular tradition depends upon the intrinsic merits of the tradition and upon the probable social consequences of such a venture.

The strength and weakness of the conservative attitude toward change is indicated by Professor Kirk: "To excuse present injustice by a plea of well-intentioned general tendency is treacherous ground for a conservative. . . ."<sup>6</sup> That many reform movements have done precisely this is evident. But the conservatives have frequently erred in the opposite direction. Too frequently they have refused to make efforts to remedy present injustices upon the plea of probable bad general tendencies. Both failures are serious. The former may undermine the bases of a social order; the latter may create a potentially explosive social situation.

It is hard, however, not to argue that the conservative failure is more serious. Too frequently the conservatives have continued to stubbornly insist upon traditional procedures in dealing with problems at the very moment the actual problems themselves have undergone substantive change. The same principles of public transportation cannot be applied to both stagecoaches and jet airliners. The two means of transportation are actually significantly different, and procedures which might be quite adequate in dealing with one are likely to be totally incapable of dealing with the other. Tradition can be of little help in dealing with many of the specific difficulties occasioned by the Industrial Revolution or the development of new mass destruction techniques, for we have no record of past attempts to deal with such problems. Too great a reliance upon customary responses may lead to total destruction—in particular, if the stimulus which calls forth the response is superficially similar to that upon which the response was conditioned but actually significantly different.<sup>7</sup> The nature of the unemployment problem in the United States today is not the same as it was in the nineteenth century. The existence of a frontier which could siphon off part of the unemployed made it possible to deal with the difficulty in a manner which is no longer available. Nevertheless, it is not unusual to hear contemporary conservatives

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6. P. 69.

7. This situation is somewhat similar to what might have occurred if one of Pavlov's dogs had become slightly deaf. The dog, being conditioned to expect certain consequences following particular sounds, might well have confused the auditory stimuli; and the result would have inevitably been a feeling of frustration, following the failure to achieve expected gratifications. Many contemporary conservatives seem to suffer from this difficulty. (This analogy is owed to Professor Louis Lambert, Department of Government, Indiana University.)

talking as if the procedures used in the nineteenth century were applicable today.

Nor can liberals accept conservative confidence in the intelligence of those in past eras as contrasted with the foolishness of present inhabitants of the earth. A reader of Burke is struck by his contempt for the intellectual and moral standards of most of his contemporaries, a contempt made more evident by the near glorification of past generations. The Providential theory of history supplies the basis for this attitude. Burke was fully convinced that the hand of God molds the history of man, but the Providential theory of history has certain difficulties. Burke was also convinced that, while divine purpose operated in history, men had free will and could at least temporarily misdirect the current of development. In his lifetime he thought foolish men were making efforts to do precisely that.

The most fascinating question with relation to this philosophy of history is a simple one. How do we know that the current has not already been misdirected? Is it not possible that our present traditions and institutions represent an abortive misdirection, rather than an exemplification of God's intent? Could we be clinging to prejudices which are contrary to God's wishes? Revolutions and drastic changes made in the past have contributed to the institutions and opinions of the world in which we live. Were all such past instances of great change providential? Is it only present and future efforts at basic reform which are contrary to God's will? Liberals, too, have acted upon the basis of strongly felt religious convictions. Are only conservative interpretations of the implications of such faith trustworthy? When faced with such a dilemma, is not "mere" reason more helpful than "mere" prejudice?

The other "canons" of conservative thought are most noteworthy for their lack of contrast with the position of modern liberals. Liberals, as well as conservatives, like diversity. Many conservatives have criticized them for liking it too much. The liberal efforts at social reform in this century have not been carried out with the objective of making life uniform, gray, and colorless. The aim has been to alleviate that poverty, fear, and insecurity which make life dull, monotonous, and sterile. Poverty, fear, and insecurity are among the great obstacles to individuality. Similarly, liberals do not propose to abolish order and classes, thus destroying "natural distinctions among men." Far from it, the liberals have tried to tear down some of the artificial barriers which have hindered the rise of talented individuals from the lower strata of our society. Nor do the liberals propose to destroy property. Since the first days of the New Deal, the number of property owners

has increased proportionately, not declined. If the objective of modern conservatives is a "property-owning democracy,"<sup>8</sup> then it must be said that the liberals in the United States have made great contributions toward the achievement of such a goal.

What then remains as a program for modern conservatism? Its most important responsibility is to reaffirm the principles already mentioned, *i.e.*, to expose the over-simplifications and excessive optimism of the more ardent disciples of reform. But this is not enough. The conservative sees real problems with which he must grapple. It is not enough merely to criticize; the conservatives, too, must have a program of their own although it need not be definite and precise. However, the reader searches in vain for a realistic analysis of modern problems in *The Conservative Mind*. Professor Kirk is more concerned to condemn than to perform the more difficult, but vastly more rewarding, task of developing means of dealing with current actualities.

Instead we are told that the chief difficulties are spiritual and moral regeneration, the need for leadership, the problem of the proletariat, and the quest for economic stability.<sup>9</sup> These are all important, but how are we to deal with them? No specific discussion of the steps by which spiritual and moral regeneration may be achieved is found in this book. The problem of leadership is to be dealt with by "the preservation of some measure of veneration, discipline, order and class . . ." combined with the "purgation of our system of education. . . ."<sup>10</sup> The difficulties raised by the existence of a large industrial proletariat are to be solved by giving them status and hope, but Professor Kirk's suggestions are confined to a demand for restoration of "true family, respect for the past, responsibility for the future, private property, duty as well as right, inner resources that matter more than mass amusements and mass vices with which the modern proletarian seeks to forget his lack of object."<sup>11</sup> These are fine words, but more than words is required. Economic stability takes on a new meaning. It is neither the securing of plenty nor, seemingly, even the achievement of minimal standards of material life but rather "the establishment of a rational relationship between endeavor and reward."<sup>12</sup> But what does this mean? What intricacies are involved in giving effect to this proposal? What is the reader to think of a discussion of the problem of economic stability which does not even mention business cycles and unemployment? How do conservatives propose to

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8. HOGG, *THE CASE FOR CONSERVATISM* 63 (1947).

9. P. 414.

10. P. 415.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Pp. 414-415.



deal with these very real difficulties? Are they Keynesians? If not, what alternatives do they propose?

Actually, outside of exhortation, there is little real effort to deal constructively with modern problems. For Great Britain he adopts the proposal of Professor Burn to restore plural voting. This indicates such a complete failure to grasp political realities as would cause Edmund Burke to spin in his grave. Similarly, for the United States, there are fulminations against the income tax, but there is no consideration of alternative means of raising the money to finance even a minimal defense system. (In fact, the central position of defense expenditures in the budgets of Great Britain and the United States is not even mentioned.) To this he does add proposals to exercise strict surveillance over big business and big labor and to institute a new system of control in industry to include representatives of the local community and the "plant community" (the union?) on the board of directors. The latter proposal is likely to cause many avowed American conservatives sleepless nights.

Professor Kirk's work speaks for a dogmatic conservatism which is all too frequently blinded to the actualities of the modern world. His hatred for modern radicals frequently results in outrageous distortions—as, for example, his assertion that universal military training in modern Britain is a product of British socialism. He seems to have forgotten the existence of the Soviet Union—as he seems to have overlooked the extreme reluctance with which the socialists continued conscription, a reluctance which accentuated the quite correct conservative insistence upon its necessity. His dislike for any actual reform, as contrasted with general remarks about the inevitability of change, is indicated by his condemnation of Sir Robert Peel who probably saved British conservatism from the stubborn shortsightedness of his contemporaries.<sup>13</sup>

The reader who is unfamiliar with works of British and American conservatives of the last century and a half will find much value in this work. The person who is concerned to see how thinkers have tried to restate conservative principles in a modern context would be better advised to turn to Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited* or Quintin Hogg's *The Case for Conservatism*.

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13. Or see his comment: "The conservative adage that all radical 'natural rights' are simply, in substance, a declaration of the Right to be Idle is suggested in Article 24 (Universal Declaration of Human Rights): 'Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.'" P. 42.

This ill becomes an author who only thirteen pages later quotes with favor a selection from Burke in which the necessity of leisure is extolled as a prerequisite of civilized behavior.

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